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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1515
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1382
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1951
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000532

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/28/2018

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: CHRISTIAN PASTOR DETAINED FOR
HOLDING "UNAUTHORIZED GATHERING"

REF: ASHGABAT 0501

Classified By: CHARGE SYLVIA REED CURRAN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Local police in Turkmenbashi raided a religious gathering April 23 and detained a registered church's pastor and two foreign visitors. The threats to plant false evidence on the pastor and the intense interrogation demonstrate how local security structures can still abuse their power. These officials no doubt fear what they cannot control and the idea of "unauthorized gatherings" goes way beyond their comfort zone. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) Timur Muradov, pastor of the Word of Life church in Turkmenbashi, informed PolOff that on April 22 he had been detained by police. Authorities discovered that Muradov was holding an unauthorized prayer service in a private home and raided it. Muradov and two other believers, who were visiting from Azerbaijan, were the only ones the authorities brought in for questioning. The two women from Azerbaijan were immediately deported. Word of Life was officially registered in late 2007.

¶4. (SBU) Muradov noted that the local police who brought him in were initially polite, and took down information about him, his church, the gathering, its purpose, and attendees. Gradually, as they tried to coerce him into writing a letter providing details on the prayer service in question, their interaction with him became more and more hostile. They tried to dissuade him from continuing to preach, and asked him why he did not practice Islam instead of Christianity, given his Turkmen ethnicity. He claimed they hit him on the head with a book. They also warned him that if he does not stop engaging in religious activity, he would be prosecuted under Article 137 of the Law on Religion, which prohibits "unauthorized gatherings" for the purpose of religious worship. (NOTE: There is no article 137 in the Law on Religion, and article 137 of the Criminal code deals with another matter entirely. The Law on Religion does not expressly prohibit services in private homes. Ministry of Justice officials told DRL DAS Barks-Ruggles that it is permissible for religious groups to worship in private homes, if neighbors don't object. END NOTE.)

¶5. (SBU) After several hours, the local chief of police arrived and tried to convince Muradov to cease his religious activity altogether. He casually suggested that if Muradov did not comply, it would be easy for his officers to slip a couple of grams of heroin into Muradov's pockets. Then they would be able to easily arrest him. When Muradov heard this, he threatened to tell diplomats at the U.S. Embassy that the police chief had threatened him. The police chief responded that perhaps Muradov was "an American spy."

¶6. (SBU) After several hours of interrogation, Muradov was released, but was to appear before a commission on April 24 for a review of his violation and determination of punishment. He also was supposed to write two letters to local authorities: one explaining the nature of the prayer gathering and a second one promising not to do it again without official authorization. He refuses to stop preaching. (NOTE: Muradov was to have been in Ashgabat on April 24 to attend an embassy-sponsored religious roundtable. His wife and an assistant had planned to come, but tickets for flights were all sold out. END NOTE.)

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Since the police were not well-versed enough in the law to know which statute Muradov was actually violating, it seems more likely to us that suspicion of a minority religious group and unease about unauthorized meetings were more salient factors in the decision to raid the service and detain the pastor. Despite changes clearly taking place in the country, various officials at different levels, and especially locally, will likely continue to feel the need for control. END COMMENT.

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